Save My Game

Adjudicating Charm Spells, Part 1

By Jason Nelson-Brown

This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

Making Sense of Charm

In this installment of *Save My Game,* we look at how to adjudicate charm and dominate spells. PCs enjoy having the power to turn enemies into friends, but they typically balk at being ordered to attack fellow party members when they become the targets of such spells. What's a DM to do?

Problem: What Can You Make a *Charmed* Character Do?

I'm confused about charm effects. According to the spell description for *charm person,* an affected character resists acting against his instincts. But what does this limitation really mean? At what point are characters acting against their will? -- Carol

Mind control spells can be very difficult to adjudicate. Compulsions in general are easy -- you cast *sleep,* and the bad guys go to sleep if they fail their saves, no questions asked! But charm-type spells are complicated because in theory you could make the target take almost any action you wish, thereby essentially duplicating the effects of almost any other mind-affecting spell.

The caster of a charmor control spell can vary the exact effect to match what the situation calls for. That very flexibility, however, makes the spell just as much a DM's nightmare as *polymorph,* because it requires evaluating a variety of different applications.

So let's take a look at how far charm and dominate spells let the caster go in terms of making people act against their will.

Solution 1: What's a Friend Worth?

If you cast *charm person* and the target fails its Will save, it becomes your friend and must "perceive your words and actions in the most favorable way." But according to the NPC Attitude

For more advice, on what happens if someone charms a member of your own party, refer to Stephen Schubert's recent Tactics & Tips column: When Good Friends Go Bad:

It happens in nearly every campaign at some point. The strong warrior, who the rest of the party admires and respects for his ability to dish out the hurt on the PCs' monstrous enemies, who seems unstoppable due to his combat prowess, and whose sword could cleave the party wizard in one hit (and take out the bard with the backswing) -- this ultimate fighting machine hears the DM utter those most frightening of words: "Make a Will save."

In many cases, the fighter becomes incapacitated for some indeterminate time. But in the worst cases, the mighty warrior

Table (*Players Handbook* page 72), a friendly character is willing to "chat, advise, offer limited help, and advocate." Fighting on your behalf is outside the realm of friendly -- only a helpful NPC (one step above friendly on the table) can be counted on for that kind of aid.

So how can you make a character helpful once your *charm person* has rendered him friendly? You could use Diplomacy, which normally requires a full minute, though you can speed it up to a full-round action by taking a -10 penalty on the check. Having a helpful creature on hand can be quite advantageous. It might actually fight to protect you of its own volition, without any orders from you at all. Since it's acting on its own, however, it may not use the kind of tactics you would like.

turns around, focusing his bloodthirsty gaze on his fellow party members. Charm monster, suggestion, confusion, and dominate person can turn the tide of a battle in an instant, and the party must then use its resources to eliminate one of its own. The tips in this article address what you might do in these situations.

Solution 2: A Reasonable Request

A *charm person* spell also lets the caster attempt an opposed Charisma check to convince the target creature to take some action that it ordinarily would not. But the spell description doesn't specify how long this process takes or what exactly it involves. Does the caster convince the target by talking (a free action), redirecting a spell effect (a move action), or taking some not-otherwise-specified action (a standard action)? In the absence of specific rules, it's up to you as DM to adjudicate such situations on a case-by-case basis. If you think talking would suffice in a particular instance, fine. If you feel that the creature takes more convincing, you might want to drop some hints to the player about what kinds of tactics might be effective.

Before you can determine what the target would not ordinarily do, though, you need to decide what it would do. Should its alignment play a role in such a decision, especially when the favor requested involves breaking some rule or law? How about the creature's Intelligence score, or knowledge the subject might have about the caster? Does a *charm person* spell make the target's mind all fuzzy? That is, if the infamous Tesfaye the Dark -- who has a price on her head big enough to buy a kingdom -- casts *charm person* on a guard, does he then treat her just the same as he would a no-name character? Does he care about -- or even remember -- Tesfaye's reputation and the value of the reward on her head while the *charm person* is in effect?

The spell description doesn't specify that the subject forgets what it knows, so he probably does remember who she is and what she's worth. And if he has any integrity at all, he probably wouldn't turn in his friend for money, any more than her boon companions would. However, if the guard is the sort who would turn in his own mother for a gold piece, then Tesfaye may still have cause to worry.

More importantly, can the caster make a request seem more reasonable than it really is? The *charm person* spell description appears to give conflicting information about what the subject can be made to do. At one point, it says that the subject will not obey suicidal orders. Shortly thereafter, it says that you could conceivably convince a *charmed* fighter to "hold off an onrushing red dragon for just a few seconds." Not only is such a request suicidal in all likelihood, but it also requires that the subject be willing to take risks on your behalf -- a favor above and beyond what a friendly character would do, as noted above. Perhaps, however, you could use Bluff to convince your friendly subject of the importance (or at least the reasonableness) of your request.

Solution 3: Taking It up a Notch

Even the more powerful *dominate person* spell is not without ambiguity. The spell description states that a

creature "forced to take actions against its nature" gets a new save at a +2 bonus, but it doesn't specify how often. Does it get one every round if the order would take more than 1 round to carry out? Hey, if it's against a character's nature to attack his friend on Round One, it's still against his nature on Round Two, right? Or if he fails the first save for a given order, does he keep following that instruction, and get another new save only when he has to switch to a different action that's against his nature? Though the spell description doesn't say, it's reasonable to assume that the new save applies only when the order to act against the creature's nature is first given. However, if you encounter a situation in which you as DM feel that more frequent saves would be appropriate, feel free to allow them, up to once per round if need be.

But does making this new saving throw break the spell entirely, or simply allow the subject to resist performing the specified action? Though it's not spelled out precisely, the spell description does give the answer to this one. The saving throw entry says, "Will negates," so any saving throw the spell allows breaks the effect completely. Thus, though *dominate person* is a powerful spell, the caster must be judicious about what orders she gives, or the additional saving throws can easily lead to wasted spells.

Though a caster can force the subject to take actions against its nature with a *dominate person* spell, "obviously self-destructive orders are not carried out." Therefore, you still couldn't order your newfound friend to hold back that onrushing red dragon unless he has some legitimate reason to believe the dragon wouldn't wipe the floor with his entrails.

Summary

Mind control spells are classic elements of fantasy, so they shouldn't be eliminated from the game, despite the difficulties of adjudicating their effects. You don't want to make them so weak that they're useless or so strong that they're overpowering, but striking a happy medium that is fair to the players at the table can be challenging.

In the next installment, we'll take a look at another aspect of adjudicating mind control spells.

About the Author

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